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Magnus Lundberg

Is the Pope Catholic?
Traditionalist Variations on a Theme

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Introduction

'Traditionalist Catholics' rarely call themselves traditionalists. In this study, I still use the concept to refer to individuals and groups who, to varying degrees, oppose the decisions of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) and the post-conciliar developments in the Catholic Church. The term is thus analytical and almost universally accepted by scholars.[1]

The 'traditionalists' see themselves as Catholics, or traditional Catholics, and emphatically claim that it is the church leadership, or at least its majority, that has departed from traditional Catholic doctrine, not them. They adhere to the so-called Tridentine Mass, the Roman Rite of 1570 (albeit in revised versions), and oppose the new Order of Mass, promulgated in 1969 and commonly called the Novus Ordo, which they consider to include substantial changes and therefore unacceptable. For them, Traditionalist Catholicism is just true Catholicism.

Although opposition to the reformed liturgy is central, traditionalists also distance themselves from the post-conciliar church's teachings more generally, e.g., on ecumenism, inter-

[1] Among the many scholars who use the term 'traditionalist Catholics' and traditionalist Catholicism' are Michael W. Cuneo, *The Smoke of Satan: Conservative and Traditionalist Dissent in Contemporary American Catholicism* (Baltimore 1997) and, much more recently, Philippe Roy-Lysencourt, "The Reception of the Second Vatican Council by Traditionalist Catholics", *The Oxford Handbook of Vatican II* (Oxford 2023), pp. 360–378.

religious dialogue, religious freedom (for non-Catholics), and the changed conceptions of the church's role in society. Doctrine and liturgy are seen as integral parts of Tradition. Since they believe that both the conciliar documents and the post-conciliar popes have departed from what they regard as traditional Catholic teaching, they might ask: How could the popes have agreed to this?

From Rome's perspective, one speaks of two kinds of traditionalist groups: (1) groups that are canonically regular with the Holy See, and (2) groups with irregular canonical status. The largest of the latter groups is the Society of Saint Pius X (SSPX; also known as FSSPX), founded in 1970 by French Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre (1905–1991). Nevertheless, the SSPX is only one of these groups, albeit the largest. Other groups usually go further in their opposition to Rome and criticize the SSPX for being too conciliatory. The so-called sedevacantists assert that all the post-conciliar popes are heretics and thus anti-popes. According to the most common version, the Holy See has been vacant since the death of Pius XII in 1958. In my article, which examines perceptions of the legitimacy of the post-conciliar popes, I only focus on groups with irregular canonical status vis-à-vis Rome.

My aim is thus to analyze different traditionalist views on whether the conciliar and post-conciliar popes – John XXIII (1958–1963), Paul VI (1963–1978), John Paul I (1978), John Paul II (1978–2005), Benedict XVI (2005–2013), Francis (2013–2025), and Leo XIV (2025–) were true popes or whether they were leaders of a new non-Catholic religion, sometimes referred to as the conciliar religion, the Novus Ordo religion, the Vatican institution or 'the church' within scare quotes, thus implying that the organization led by the current Roman pontiff is not the true Church. They often put words such as 'pope', 'cardinal', and 'bishop' within scare quotes, noting how absurd such designations are in an era of almost complete apostasy. Another way

of distancing themselves from the conciliar and post-conciliar popes is to use Arabic numerals rather than Roman, e.g., Paul 6 or John Paul 2 (or JP 2), or to use their civil names, Montini or Bergoglio.

This study centers on discussions from the mid-1960s to the early 1990s about whether John XXIII and Paul VI were antipopes. For those who hold that this was the case, it is obvious that their successors were, too, antipopes. However, some people believe that the real break from traditional Catholic doctrine only came with Francis's pontificate. These recent discussions offer arguments similar to those presented earlier, and I do not specifically address the questions about Francis's position.

Though there is abundant literature on the status of the conciliar and post-conciliar popes, almost all of it is written by adherents of different traditionalist positions, presenting arguments for their positions and countering others. More independent research on several of the more radical traditionalist views and groups is limited, and, to my knowledge, there is no broad, detailed scholarly overview focusing on the papal issue, at least not in English.[2]

The traditionalist landscape comprises many groups, congregations, parishes, Mass centers, bishops, priests, networks, authors, publishers, publications, websites, blogs, and social media. Since the emphasis of my study is on the period up to the early 1990s, it operates in a pre-Internet world and, above all, a

[2] For good condensed analyzes of some of the perspectives, however, see Paul Airiau, "Le pape comme scandale: Du Sédevacantisme et d'Antipapism dans le Catholicisme post Vatican-II", in Jean-François Galinier-Pallerola et al. (eds), *La participation des laïcs aux débats ecclésiaux après le concile Vatican II* (Paris 2014), pp. 427–445 and Cyrille Dounot, "Paul VI hérétique?: La déposition du pape dans le discours traditionaliste", in Cyrille Dounot, Nicolas Warembourg & Boris Bernarbé (eds.), *La déposition du pape hérétique: Lieux théologiques, modèles canoniques, enjeux constitutionnels* (Paris 2019), pp. 133–161.

world without social media, although the texts I use and the ideas they contain undoubtedly live on and are disseminated online.

Given the international character of Traditionalist Catholicism, my sources are multilingual, written in French, German, English, Spanish, and Portuguese. The lion's part of the texts I refer to was initially published in books or journals with limited circulation. However, new editions and translations gradually formed a canon or, more precisely, several canons that supported different positions on the papal question. As much as possible, I refer to the original editions. However, accessing them has not always been possible, and I use later editions or translations in those cases.

The authors use diverse sources to substantiate their positions on the papal question: conciliar documents, bulls, encyclicals, and other papal documents, as well as scholastic and neoscholastic theology, and canon law. These types of sources are intertwined with messages in private revelations to varying degrees, not least in nineteenth- and twentieth-century apocalyptically centered Marian apparitions, as well as in older and newer prophecies. Thus, an apocalyptic canon developed alongside a more systematic theological and legal one.[3]

A relatively widespread contemporary Catholic apocalyptic model, which, however, is not part of official church doctrine, consists of three acts. During the first, most Catholics will abandon the true faith. Then come wars and natural disasters. The faithful remnant will be persecuted, and evil forces will hold humanity in an iron grip. A false pope will occupy the Holy See, while a true pope leads the remnant. The faithful's victory is

[3] For a study of similar networks and canon formations in relation to unofficial modern Marian apparitions, see Peter Jan Margry, "The Global Network of Deviant Revelatory Marian Movements," in Chris Maunder (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Mary* (Oxford 2019), pp. 663–685.

followed by a period of peace as large groups repent and submit to the true pope. During the third phase, however, most will apostatize. Then, a final war will break out, the world will end, and with God's help, the faithful will triumph. This model is based on apocalyptic texts, not least apocalyptically centered apparitions.[4]

The traditionalist groups' worldviews often have conspiracist features; they are characterized by ideas about how various powerful, at least semi-clandestine, cabals seek to reshape the world in line with their agendas. These views have parallels in completely different confessional and ideological contexts.[5]

According to traditionalist conspiracy theories, the enemies of the Catholic Church have gradually infiltrated its leadership and dismantled its teachings from within. The enemies are Freemasons, Jews (or 'Zionists'), and communists. Freemasonry is often seen as the driving force, but the movements are considered intertwined and share a common agenda. According to most traditionalists, its goal is to establish a universal human-centered religion and a universal political system, in short, a new world order. Ideas about a far-reaching Masonic conspiracy are used not only to explain Rome's recent development but also to argue against traditionalist positions other than their own. Through groups that on the surface appear traditional, the Freemasons and, ultimately, Satan operate; their only task is to deceive the elect.[6]

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[4] See e.g. Paul Airiau, *L'Église et l'Apocalypse du XIXe siècle à nos jours* (Paris 2000) and Massimo Introvigne, "Modern Catholic Millennialism", in Catherine Wessinger (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of Millennialism* (Oxford 2011), pp. 549–566.

[5] For a broad overview of conspiracism, see Michael Butter & Peter Knight (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories* (New York 2020). See also my concluding reflections in this book.

[6] Bernard Doherty, "'A Chain of Deep-Laid and Premeditated Villainy': The Roman Catholic Culture of Conspiracy from the Abbé de Barruel

My study is divided into eight somewhat overlapping chapters with a partly overlapping chronology. I begin (Part I) by briefly outlining traditionalist opposition during and immediately after Vatican II and then focus on Marcel Lefebvre's relation to the post-conciliar papacy. After that (Part II), I turn to authors and movements who argued that Paul VI expressed heretical views, but that no one but the pope could decide this in a strict sense. The pope must, therefore, be convinced of his heresy and repent or resign.

Parts III and IV analyze sedevacantist varieties and the emergence of a sedevacantist church hierarchy. The authors and groups I study argue that Paul VI was not a true pope and often claim that John XXIII was an antipope as well. Part V focuses on criticisms that some sedevacantists would direct at their own position. They argued that the establishment of a sedevacantist church organization, bishops included, lacked a canonical basis and, in itself, constituted a non-Catholic religion. No priest or bishop was authorized to administer the sacraments without a papal mandate, as they lacked the necessary authority and jurisdiction during the long Sede Vacante. A new conclave, consisting of those not among the apostate cardinals, had to be convened to elect a true pope, and on a few occasions during the 1990s, such conclaves were held, electing alternative popes.

Parts VI through VIII focus on very different papal theories. Initially (Part VI), I analyze the ideas that Paul VI was the true pope but was drugged into making heretical statements, or that he was imprisoned and replaced by a doppelganger who made such statements. Part VII explains the so-called Cardinal Siri theory, the idea that someone else was elected pope in 1963, or that someone else was elected pope in both 1958 and 1963. The person elected was the traditionalist Cardinal Giuseppe Siri, but

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to Radical Traditionalism", *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 35.2 (2022), pp. 245–268.

he was forced to decline due to external threats. In Part VIII, I analyze two of the many groups that claim that, through direct intervention, God has provided the church with a true pope and moved the Holy See from Rome. In my concluding chapter, I recapitulate some basic ideas. However, above all, I engage in a more general discussion of conspiracism, a consistent feature of the traditionalist variations I have studied.

I. To Accept, But to Oppose: Lefebvre and the Pope

Marcel Lefebvre was archbishop of Dakar, in present-day Senegal, until 1962, when he was transferred to the small French diocese of Tulle. In the same year, he was elected Superior General of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit (the Spiritans, or Holy Ghost Fathers), and he left the diocese. However, he was appointed titular archbishop at the same time.[7]

Lefebvre attended all sessions of the Second Vatican Council but made only a few interventions in plenary. However, he was an important coordinator of the traditionalist resistance that took its most concrete form in the Coetus. Internationalis Patrum (CIP): a loosely knit network of bishops and theologians. Brazilian bishops Geraldo de Proença Sigaud (1909–1999) and Antônio Castro Mayer (1904–1991) were other driving forces. Although the CIP discussed many issues, the opposition to freedom of religion, meaning something more than the right to practice the Catholic faith freely, was at the center. Although the group of outspoken traditionalist bishops constituted a small minority of the conciliar fathers, that is, the more than 2,000

[7] Bernard Tissier de Mallerais, *Marcel Lefebvre: Une vie* (Paris 2002). It is written by one of Lefebvre's bishops, but it is well-documented. See also, for example, Wilhelm Damberg, "Die Priesterbruderschaft St. Pius X. (FSSPX) und ihr politisch-geistesgeschichtlicher Hintergrund", in Peter Hünermann (ed.), *Exkommunikation oder Kommunikation?: Der Weg der Kirche nach dem II. Vatikanum und die Pius-Brüder* (Freiburg 2009), pp. 69–122, and Brian Sudlow, "The Frenchness of Marcel Lefebvre and the Society of St Pius X: A New Reading", *French Cultural Studies* 28.1 (2017), pp. 79–94.

bishops who attended, individual traditionalist prelates made so many statements in the plenary sessions that the opposition seemed to be much stronger.

Still, despite the criticism, few bishops voted against the final versions of the individual council documents. Even the most controversial ones, such as the Declaration on Freedom of Religion, *Dignitatis Humanae*, were approved by 97% of the bishops present, and more bishops signed it after the pope promulgated it.[8]

In the late 1960s, the reform of the Order of Mass, which the Council had opened up, came about. The Novus Ordo that could be said in the vernacular became the fundamental issue of contention for traditionalists. Before the papal promulgation in 1969, Lefebvre participated in the group that worked on *Breve Esame Critico del Novus Ordo Missae*, but he was not one of the principal authors. In the document sent to Paul VI and all the cardinals, the authors claimed that the Novus Ordo clearly departed from the traditional Catholic Eucharistic theology. It made the Mass more Protestant, and the central sacrificial character almost disappeared. Against this background, they urged the pope to reconsider and stop the implementation. Two traditionalist cardinals, Alfredo Ottaviani (1890–1979) and Antonio Bacci (1885–1971), signed the text. However, they were

[8] For good overviews of the networks at the Council, see John W. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, MA 2008) and, more generally, Catherine E. Clifford & Massimo Faggioli (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Vatican II* (Oxford 2023). For special studies of traditionalist networks during the Council, see Philippe Roy-Lysencourt, "Le Coetus Internationalis Patrum : Un group d'opposants au seins du Concile Vatican II" (Diss. Ouébec 2011) and José Oscar Beozzo "Padres conciliares brasileiros no Vaticano II: Participação e prosopografia 1959–1965" (Diss. São Paulo 2001).

uninvolved in the work and were unaware of how public the text would become.[9]

In 1969, Lefebvre received permission from the bishop of Fribourg to start SSPX to train future priests in the older rite. However, Lefebvre initially had no principled opposition to saying Mass according to the Novus Ordo. Canonically, the Society was a *pia unio*, a temporary (ad experimentum) group. Its first seminary was opened in 1970 in Ecône in the nearby Swiss diocese of Sion. The idea was that, after completing their training, the seminarians should be incardinated in a diocese, i.e., placed under the jurisdiction of a diocesan bishop, and should say Mass only according to the pre-conciliar rite following the revised missal of 1962, promulgated by John XXIII.[10]

The vast majority of the French bishops opposed Lefebvre and the SSPX and, with few exceptions, did not want to incardinate priests from Ecône, which they considered a 'wild cat seminary' that attracted unsuitable candidates, believing that Lefebvre completely lacked judgment. After an apostolic visitation, the local bishop of Sion, with Rome's support, removed the Society's status as a *pia unio* in 1975. The priestly brotherhood thus lacked canonical status, and Lefebvre, who was not a diocesan bishop, was explicitly forbidden to ordain priests. When he ordained priests anyway, he was suspended in 1976.[11] From the beginning of the 1970s, the Society expanded, starting seminaries in France, Germany, and the United States. They had also founded priories and Mass centers in many places, where only the Tridentine Mass was used.[12]

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[9] In English translation, the document is called *A Brief Critical Study of the Novus Ordo Missae*, September 25, 1969. It is available, for example, on www.angeluspress.org/blogs/catholic-doctrine/a-brief-critical-study-of-the-novus-ordo-missae [accessed 2025-12-03].
[10] Tissier de Mallerais 2002, pp. 429–495.
[11] Tissier de Mallerais 2002, pp. 496–521.
[12] Tissier de Mallerais 2002, pp. 523–556.

Despite the growing and harsh criticism of the conciliar documents, the Novus Ordo, and the post-conciliar magisterium, Lefebvre never explicitly claimed that the Holy See was vacant. Faithful Catholics, he argued, should recognize the pope's pronouncements if they did not contradict what he perceived as the pre-conciliar magisterium: to recognize the pope but not accept everything he said. In 1974, Lefebvre wrote a short document, *La déclaration*, distinguishing between 'eternal Rome' and the 'modern Vatican institution.' According to him, it was necessary to follow the traditional magisterium and oppose the 'Rome of neo-Modernist and neo-Protestant tendencies.' The conciliar reforms and the Novus Ordo created chaos and destruction, and the SSPX saw it as its duty to follow the 'timeless Magisterium' amid a profound crisis.[13]

After the suspension in 1976, Lefebvre publicly defied Rome's decision and celebrated a Mass in Lille, attended by 10,000 people. On this occasion, he gave a sermon. The gist was much the same as before, but the tone was harsher. The relationship between the new liberal church and 'revolutions and uprisings' was likened to 'infidelity.' This relationship resulted in 'bastards.' The liberal priests were 'illegitimate.' The Novus Ordo was a 'bastard Mass,' and it was unclear whether Lefebvre thought it was entirely valid or, at least, always valid.[14]

After the gathering in Lille, Paul VI summoned Lefebvre to a private audience in Rome a few weeks later. The tone of the conversation was harsh, and, according to documents published by the SSPX, the pope said, among other things: 'Must I hand in my resignation and let you take my place?' Lefebvre asserted his loyalty to the pontiff during the audience, although he again distinguished between the traditional magisterium and post-

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[13] Marcel Lefebvre, "The Declaration of 21 November 1974", in Michael Davies (ed.), *Apologia Pro Marcel Lefebvre*, vol. 1: 1905–1976 (Dickinson 1980), Chapter 4.

[14] "The Mass at Lille," August 29, 1976, in Davies 1980, Chapter 13.

conciliar developments. The mutual aversion between the Pope and Lefebvre was as personal as it was theological.[15]

At the end of 1979, Marcel Lefebvre wrote a brief text evaluating the pontificate of Paul VI (1963–1978). According to the archbishop, he had created destruction unparalleled in the history of the Church. He had 'signed texts close to heresy if not formally heretical,' which resembled those promoted by the enemies of the Church', the term commonly used to designate Freemasons. It was a theme that Lefebvre would return to: that the pope was possibly, or even probably, a heretic. Nevertheless, he did not conclude that Paul VI had been an antipope.

Lefebvre also addressed the question of whether the election of Pope John Paul II was valid. Because Paul VI had appointed so many, in his view, liberal cardinals and had also deprived cardinals over the age of 80 of the right to vote, he believed that the conclaves of 1978, when John Paul I and John Paul II were elected, were questionable. At the same time, they were probably still valid since cardinals appointed by Pius XII also approved the results. According to Lefebvre, continued contact with John Paul II was important:

> We wish to remain attached to Rome and to the Successor of Peter, while refusing his liberalism through fidelity to his predecessors. We are not afraid to speak to him, respectfully but firmly, as did St. Paul with St. Peter.[16]

In *Lettre ouverte aux catholiques perplexes* (1984), Lefebvre claimed that the state of the Church had not improved during the pontificate of John Paul II. Instead of distancing himself from

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[15] "The Audience with Pope Paul VI," September 11, 1976, in Davies 1980, Chapter 14.

[16] Marcel Lefebvre, "The New Mass and the Pope", 8 November 1979, in Michael Davies (ed.), *Apologia Pro Marcel Lefebvre*, vol. 2: 1977–1979 (Dickinson 1983), Chapter 40.

the Council, the pope had promulgated a new Code of Canon Law (1983) that further cemented the reforms, and, not least, he showed an even greater interest in ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue than his predecessor, which the archbishop regarded as signs of religious indifferentism and therefore an anti-Catholic activity.

The new teachings that were passed on to the bishops and priests through the pope constituted, according to Lefebvre, a 'spiritual abortion' of the true Catholic faith, and Satan was the force behind it. Despite the strong language, the archbishop did not explicitly state that Paul VI (or John Paul II) was a heretic but wrote, 'one day that question will be answered.' It could be the case, but no conclusions can be drawn yet. The underlying problem was also who would declare the pope, the absolute head of the Church, a heretic or an antipope.[17]

In his last longer text, *Ils l'ont décourroné* (1987), which built on earlier publications, Lefebvre returned to the theme of possible papal heresy.

> Perhaps you say: in thirty years we will discover things that have been hidden, things that should have opened our eyes here and now; statements made by the pope that absolutely go against the Tradition of the Church, etc. Perhaps that is so. Nevertheless, I do not think it is necessary to resort to these explanations, nor is it appropriate to follow these hypotheses.[18]

The question of possible papal heresy thus did not seem to be a priority for Lefebvre. Instead, from 1980 onwards, he distanced himself from sedevacantists who claimed that there was no true pope and considered his own position 'sensible' and 'realistic.'

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[17] Marcel Lefebvre, *Lettre ouverte aux catholiques perplexes* ([1984], Paris 2016).
[18] Marcel Lefebvre , *Ils l'ont découronné* ([1987], Paris 2017).

The important thing was that the SSPX defended the traditional faith and obeyed the pope to the extent that his teaching was considered in line with it, without taking a position on his validity. Although Lefebvre had been suspended, he argued that he and the SSPX had the right to administer the sacraments in the state of emergency that modern times constituted.

Since most other bishops were considered faithless liberals, the traditionalists around Lefebvre needed to secure the apostolic succession, and by the 1970s, many hoped he would consecrate bishops. In 1978, Lefebvre instead received an independent Catholic bishop, Georg Schmitz (b. 1940), into the SSPX after he had renounced his former heresies. Initially, the idea was not for him to serve as a bishop, but he nevertheless assisted in the ordinations of deacons and priests at Ecône. Schmitz was seen, at least briefly, as a possible successor to Lefebvre, but left the SSPX in the 1980s and became a sedevacantist.[19]

It was not until 1988 that the then 83-year-old Lefebvre and his Brazilian colleague Antônio Castro Mayer consecrated four SSPX priests as bishops despite Rome's explicit prohibition. As the consecrations were carried out, all those involved were excommunicated.[20] Before the ceremony, Lefebvre addressed the future bishops in a document that can be considered his unofficial final word on the papal issue. He argued that SSPX's task was to defend the faith until a 'completely Catholic pope'

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[19] Interestingly, Georg Schmitz is not mentioned in any academic studies that I know of. However, I have spoken with several people who were seminarians in Ecône at the time and can attest that Schmitz participated in diaconal and priestly ordinations. See also an article on the generally very well-informed sedevacantist website Sursum Corda: "Georg Schmitz, el obispo veterocatólico que recibió Monseñor Lefebvre" (2020), https://sursumpost.wordpress.com/2020/10/18/georg-schmitz-el-obispo-veterocatolico-que-recibio-monsenor-lefebvre/#_ftn3 [accessed 2025-12-03].

[20] Tissier de Mallerais 2002, pp. 589–595.

was elected. Although Lefebvre thus accused John Paul II of not being Catholic in the complete sense, the archbishop did not now draw the explicit conclusion that the Holy See was vacant. At the same time, it is remarkable, to say the least, that he still claimed that 'antichrists' occupied the Holy See and held other high church offices in Rome.[21]

[21] Marcel Lefebvre "Lettre aux futurs évêques", 29 August 1987, in Tissier de Mallerais 2002, pp. 658–659.

II. Heresy and Schism: To Convince the Pope

Marcel Lefebvre was not a particularly systematic writer. However, during the late 1960s and especially during the 1970s, individual authors, both clergy and laypeople, began to systematically examine the question of whether a pope could become a heretic and, more specifically, whether Paul VI was a heretic and, if so, how he could be deposed, or whether he had already *ipso facto* deposed himself.

They primarily evaluated Cardinal Robert Bellarmine's (1542–1621) five alternative theses in *De Romano Pontifice* (1588): (1) A pope cannot become a heretic; (2) The pope can be deposed (by God) even if the heresy is not public; (3) The pope cannot be deposed even if he has become a public heretic; (4) Even if the pope is publicly revealed to be a heretic, he is not *ipso facto* deposed, but must be deposed by other church authorities, primarily the college of cardinals or a council; and (5) A pope who becomes a heretic has *ipso facto* deposed himself because he is then no longer a Christian (i.e. Catholic). Bellarmine found the most support for the latter alternative: that a Sede Vacante automatically ensued if the pope publicly expressed heresy.[22]

An important traditionalist in the 1960s and 1970s was the French priest Georges de Nantes (1924–2010), often referred to

[22] The text was originally published in Roberto Bellarmino, *Disputationes de Controversiis Christianae Fidei* (Ingolstadt 1588), vol I, lib. II, chap. XXX. See also the modern English translation: Robert Bellarmine, *De Romano Pontifice: On the Roman Pontiff* (Post Falls 2015), pp. 304–310.

as the Abbé de Nantes. He declared that Vatican II's positions on freedom of religion, ecumenism, and the more positive evaluation of non-Christian religions, especially Judaism, were heretical. According to the Abbé, the Church was heading towards self-destruction and the Catholic faith was being replaced by a new anthropocentric religion. He was suspended in 1969 and then founded the Ligue de la Contre-Réforme Catholique, and his newsletters and other publications, which were translated into several languages, were widely distributed.[23]

Between 1967 and 1973, the Abbé de Nantes wrote several texts addressing whether Paul VI was a heretic and, if so, how he could be deposed. The Abbé concluded that a Pope could become a heretic and that Paul VI had ceased to be a Pope when he formally signed the Council's final documents in 1965 or even earlier. Still, according to the Abbé, a papal heretic was not deposed *ipso facto*, but neither could he be deposed by a lower ecclesiastical authority; he had to depose himself after being convinced of his heresy. In 1973, the Abbé therefore published the *Liber accusationis*, an extensive collection of statements and activities that he asserted were signs of Paul VI's heresies and schism. The aim was for the pope to be convinced by the arguments and resign, and for the cardinals to summon a new council to distance themselves from the "conciliar religion."[24]

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[23] The theology of Georges de Nantes is little explored. For a study of his views on the Council and Paul VI, see Dounot 2017, pp. 133–146. On the Abbé de Nantes more generally, see Luc Perrin, "De l'appel du silence à Saint-Parries-les-Vaudes: Un foucaldien inattendu", *Revue des sciences religieuses* 82.4 (2008), pp. 484–496 and "La question de l'autorité dans le traditionalisme Catholique*", Revue de sciences religieuses* 87.1 (2013), pp. 61–76.

[24] Georges de Nantes, *Liber Accusationis. Al Nostro Santo Padre Paolo VI per grazia di Dio e legge della Chiesa giudice supremo di tutti i fideli di Cristo denuncia per eresia, schisma e scandalo a carico del nostro fratello nella fede* (Rome 1973).

In the United States, several writers took up the papal question as early as the 1960s. The priest and canon law professor, Gommar DePauw (1918–2005), criticized the Council while it was still in progress and founded the Catholic Traditionalist Movement. In 1967, he published the article "Catholic or Conciliar?" in which he argued that the Conciliar Church was a new religion that had nothing to do with Catholicism. The same year, he wrote an open letter to Paul VI titled "Be Thou Peter!" in which he urged him to oppose the disastrous conciliar changes. He could not be a true pope if he did not do so.[25]

Traditionalists in the United States condemned the Novus Ordo and the revised Order of Mass in English, adopted in 1967. Patrick Henry Omlor (1931–2013) wrote a comprehensive essay entitled "Questioning the Validity of the Masses Using the New, All-English Canon" (1968), in which he argued that the New Mass was a non-Catholic rite. Omlor later became an influential sedevacantist writer.[26]

In 1970, Brazilian lawyer Arnoldo Vidigal Xavier da Silveira (1929–2018), who was one of the founders of the traditionalist Associação Brasileira de Defesa da Tradição, Família e Propriedade (TFP), published a 300-page volume consisting of two separate parts: *A Missa Nova de Paulo VI: O que pensar* and *A Hipótese teológica de um Papa Herege*. In addition to arguing that the Novus Ordo was invalid, he discussed whether a pope could become a heretic.

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[25] Gommar DePauw, "Catholic or Conciliar" (1967), available on www.traditio.com/tradlib/depauw67.txt [accessed 2024-04-03] and "Be Thou Peter!" (1967) available on www.traditioninaction.org/bestof/bst002pauw.htm [accessed 2025-12-03]. On DePauw, see Cuneo 1997, pp. 21–22, 90–91.

[26] The text is also published in Patrick Henry Omlor, *The Robber Church: The Collected Writings, 1968–1997* (Stouffville 1998).

Silveira started from Bellarmine's theses and, like him, believed that the fifth position—that a heretical pope was *ipso facto* deposed—was the most probable. However, he did not draw the explicit conclusion that Paul VI was deposed, even though in the book's first part, he had established that the Novus Ordo was a heretical ritual. Although the book was initially published in a minimal Portuguese edition, it gained significance when Bishop Antônio Castro Mayer sent it to Paul VI and other high church representatives. In doing so, Vidigal Xavier da Silveira, at least indirectly, did the same thing as the Abbé de Nantes: presented evidence so the pope would conclude that he should resign.[27]

[27] Arnoldo Vidigal Xavier da Silveira, *A Missa Nova de Paulo VI: O que pensar* (mimeographed, 1970); see also a new edition in two separate volumes: *A Missa Nova de Paulo VI: O que pensar* and *A Hipótese teológica de um Papa Herege* (without place of publication 2023), cf. Dounot 2017, pp. 146–149,

III. Sede Vacante: An Intruder on the Holy See

When a pope dies or resigns, Sede Vacante ensues, and the Holy See is vacant until a new pope is elected. It is a canonical anomaly and a crisis that must be resolved as soon as possible by summoning a conclave. Since the early 1980s, the term "sede-vacantist" has been used to describe those who believe that Paul VI and his successors were not true popes. Later, claiming that John XXIII was not a legitimate pope became more common. According to this latter version, the Holy See has been vacant since the death of Pius XII in 1958.

In the early 1980s, SSPX followers coined the term 'sedevacantist.' It was initially an invective used to distinguish themselves from the emerging, more radical groups.[28] One explanation was that they wanted to distance themselves from the SSPX priest Juan María Fernández Krohn (b. 1948), who, in 1982, tried to assassinate John Paul II during his visit to Fatima, Portugal. He was described in statements by Lefebvre as a sedevacantist. The SSPX claimed Krohn had already been expelled, but this was not the case.[29] Another more general

[28] For evidence that sedevacantism was perceived as a term of abuse in the early 1980s, see, for example, [George Musey], "Open Letter to Archbishop Lefebvre," *Sacred Heart Newsletter*, November 1983, pp. 3–4.

[29] See Sedevacantist Anthony Cekada's, "Juan Fernandez Krohn, 'Papal Assassin,' and SSPX" (2008), http://www.fathercekada.com/2008/10/19/juan-fernandez-krohn-papal-assassin-and-sspx/ [accessed

explanation for the use of the term was that growing groups of priests and seminarians, especially in the United States, left the SSPX during the 1980s as they believed that Lefebvre did not draw the obvious conclusion from his statements and had too active contacts with John Paul II, whom they saw as the representative of a foreign religion. Other priests were excluded from SSPX because they believed John Paul was an antipope and refused to pray for him at Mass or use the 1962 Missal, which they believed was tainted with modernism.[30]

From the late 1980s and more generally during the 1990s, the terms 'sedevacantist' and 'sedevacantism' began to be used by the groups themselves. Long before that, however, individuals and groups had declared that the conciliar and post-conciliar popes were heretics and had thereby been deposed or had deposed themselves. This could be dated to either 1958, 1963, or possibly 1965, when Paul VI promulgated the conciliar documents, or even as late as 1969 with the approval of the Novus Ordo. It is therefore important to emphasize that sedevacantism not only meant distancing from Lefebvre but a separate, and partly earlier, line of thought.[31]

One person in the United States who declared the Holy See vacant as early as 1967 was Francis K. Schuckardt (1937–2006), a former secretary in the Blue Army, a huge Mariocentric Catholic lay organization. In protest against the Council, he

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2025-12-03] and Juan Fernández Krohn, *Krohn, el Cura Papicida: Confesión y Apología* (Almería 2016).

[30] See, for example, Noël Barbara, *Fortes in Fide: Ecône Full Stop* (Tours 1983), available at http://www.the-pope.com/econefs.html [accessed 2025-12-03]. For a perspective of former SSPX priests in the United States, see Anthony Cekada, "The Nine vs. Lefebvre: We Resist You to Your Face" (2008), https://www.traditionalmass.org/images/articles/NineVLefebvre.pdf [accessed 2024-12-03].

[31] Francesco Ricossa, "Respuesta al número especial de 'La Tradizione Cattolica' sobre el sedevacantismo (nº 1/2003, 52)", *Sodalitum* 19.2 (2003), pp. 3–41.

founded the Fatima Crusade and the Congregation of Mary Immaculate Queen (CMRI), based in Idaho, which the local bishop soon banned due to members' public condemnations of the Council and the pope. Schuckardt and his closest man, Denis Chicoine (1937–1995), traveled the country to present their version of the Fatima message. Their arguments were not dogmatic or canonical but apocalyptic.

Schuckardt and Chicaoine referred to the so-called third secret, given by the Virgin of Fatima but not made public by the Holy See. However, they believed they had evidence that it contained the message that an antipope would appear before the end of the twentieth century. What distinguished Schuckardt and his followers from other traditionalist groups was their ability to create a unified community that included both religious and lay members. Initially, CMRI was centered in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, where followers moved to live a Catholic life. Then, they started a larger community in Spokane, Washington. CMRI was a significantly larger and more cohesive group at the time than the other Sedevacantist movements.[32]

A completely different type of argument was advanced in Latin America. It was based on a detailed analysis of dogmatic theology and canon law. One of the early representatives was Argentine Latinist Carlos Disandro (1919–1994). He wrote about the papal question in *Iglesia y Pontificado: Una breve question teológica* (1969), and in many articles in the magazine *Hostería Volante,* eventually adopting a clear sedevacantist position. He later came to oppose the SSPX, which grew strongly in Argentina during the military dictatorship (1976–1983), for not being sufficiently Catholic.[33]

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[32]For details about Schuckardt and his group, see Magnus Lundberg, "Bishop Francis Schuckardt and the Papacy" (Uppsala 2024).

[33] On Disandro, see Juan Luis Carnagui, "Nacionalistas, católicos y peronistas: Auge, afianzamiento y reconfiguración de la Concentración

Another early advocate of sedevacantism was the Mexican priest Joaquín Sáenz y Arriaga (1899–1976). He had been a Jesuit but had left the order in the early 1950s because he believed it had become too liberal. Sáenz y Arriaga had also long been part of far-right and anti-Semitic groups, who already, at the beginning of the Second Vatican Council, feared that the church's attitude towards Judaism would change.[34]

At the end of the Council's first session in 1962, an 800-page book, *Complotto contro la Chiesa,* was distributed to bishops present. The author was called Maurice Pinay, but it was a pseudonym. Some have suggested that Sáenz y Arriaga wrote the book. He was certainly involved, but there is much evidence that it was a collective work of the Mexican far-right and anti-Semitic Tecos group led by Carlos Cuesta Gallardo (1911–1985).[35]

The basic idea of *Complotto contro la Chiesa* is that the Church was facing a total Jewish-Masonic-Communist takeover. The message was inspired by the forgery *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (1903) but also by the ideas of the vehemently anti-Semitic Irish priest Denis Fahey (1883–1954), which were widely disseminated, especially in the United States during the 1930s and 1940s, not least through the influential radio priest

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Nacional Universitaria (CNU) La Plata, 1955–1974" (Diss. Mar de Plata 2016).

[34] On Sáenz y Arriaga, see María Martha Pacheco, "Tradicionalismo católico posconciliar: El caso Sáenz y Arriaga", in María Martha Pacheco (ed.), *Religion y sociedad en México durante el siglo XX* (Mexico City 2007), pp. 183–207 and Luis Herrán Ávila, "Las Falsas Derechas: Conflict and Convergence in Mexico's Post-Cristero Right after the Second Vatican Council", *The Americas* , 79.2 (2022), pp. 321–350.

[35] Maurice Pinay, *Complotto contro la Chiesa* (Rome 1962). For a careful study of the Mexican far-right and integrist milieu, see Austreberto Martínez Villegas, "Tradicionalismo y conservadurismo integrista en el catolicismo de México después del Concilio Vaticano II: Continuidades y transformaciones en Guadalajara, Jalisco y Atlalahuacan, Morelos (1965–2012)" (Diss., Mexico City 2016).

Charles Caughlin (1891–1979), who had millions of listeners and devoted increasing amounts of airtime to promoting anti-Semitic ideas. The church authorities eventually deposed him.[36]

The group behind the pseudonym Maurice Pinay claimed that this Jewish-Masonic-Communist cabal would dominate the next conclave and that the pope elected would be a 'satanic crypto-Jew.' So, it can be said that the authors at least predicted a prolonged Sede Vacante and the appearance of an antipope.[37]

In connection with the approval of the declaration on non-Christian religions, *Nostra Aetate*, in mid-October 1965, which in its final version addressed not only Judaism but also the Church's relations to other religions, a four-page document was distributed to the bishops. It focused on the Church's relations towards the Jews. An anonymous author wrote the text, but probably not one of the Mexicans who wrote *Complotto*.

> It is evident that only an antipope or a robber council [*conciliabulum*] could approve a declaration of this kind. And like an ever-increasing number of Catholics scattered throughout the world, I am determined to act in whatever way is necessary to save the Church from disgrace.[38]

After the Council and the introduction of the Novus Ordo, Sáenz y Arriaga wrote an extensive book entitled *La Nueva Iglesia*

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[36] On Fahey's Catholic anti-Semitism and influence in the United States during the 1930s, 1940s, and early 1950s, see Mary Christine Athans, *The Coughlin–Fahey Connection: Father Denis Fahey, CSSp, and Religious Anti-Semitism in the United States, 1938–1954* (New York 1991).

[37] Pinay 1962 .

[38] The writing has the long title, or rather the content description, *Aucun Concile ni aucun Pape ne peuvent condemner Jésus, l'Église catholique, apostolique et romaine, ses pontifes et les conciles les plus illustres. Or, la déclaration sur les juifs comporte implicitement une telle condamnation, et pour cette éminente raison, doit être réjectée* . The quoted passage is reproduced in Ricossa 2003, p. 11.

Montiniana (1971). There, he compared the pre-conciliar magisterium with developments during and after the Council, stating that the post-conciliar religion had nothing to do with Catholicism but was a Masonic and Zionist, anthropocentric religion. The leader of such an organization could not be a true pontiff. Saenz y Arriaga also claimed that Paul VI himself was a Jew. After publishing the book, he was excommunicated. In response, he wrote a new, extensive book, *Sede Vacante* (1973), in which he further developed his ideas and argued that convening a new conclave was necessary to elect a valid pope and save the church.[39]

Sáenz y Arriaga's books did not circulate widely during the 1970s. However, he was a very active lobbyist from the late 1960s onwards, traveling to Europe to meet like-minded people and try to convince traditionalist cardinals and bishops, including Marcel Lefebvre, of the sedevacantist position and the necessity of a new council.[40]

In Europe, especially in France and Germany, a sedevacantist movement emerged in the early 1970s. The movement was not uniform, but, in general, adherents gradually shifted from harsh criticism of the post-conciliar church and the pope to a pronounced sedevacantist stance. Although the individual groups were small, their magazines and other publications, which were translated into several languages, reached a considerably larger readership. In France, for example, the priests Noël Barbara (1910–2002) and Louis Coache (1924–1993) wrote a small booklet, *Vademecum du catholique fidèle* (1968), which moved toward a sedevacantist stance and was signed by more than a hundred priests, most of them French. It was translated into several other languages, and Barbara and

[39] Joaquín Sáenz y Arriaga, *La nueva iglesia montiniana* (Mexico City 1971) and *Sede Vacante: Paulo VI no es legito papa* (Mexico City 1973).
[40] Ricossa 2003.

Coache also published several journals, gradually approaching sedevacantist positions strictly.[41]

The German journal *Einsicht*, founded in 1971, became an important node in the emerging European traditionalist network and, by extension, in the sedevacantist network. Initially, one of the most prolific writers was the German philosophy professor Reinhard Lauth (1919–2007). Another university teacher, Eberhard Heller (b. 1942), became editor in the mid-1970s and still is (2026). *Einsicht* began publishing articles by German-speaking authors and translations into German, but eventually the magazine began publishing articles in several languages.[42] Another influential German magazine in the 1970s was *Kyrie Eleison*, published by the Liga katholischer Traditionalisten. The editor was Elisabeth Gerstner (1924–2005), who had previously been an interpreter in the Vatican but later became an early sedevacantist leader and a prolific writer.[43]

For several years in the early 1970s, people in these circles, such as Saenz y Arriaga, Coache, Barbara, and Gerstner, organized the so-called Marches to Rome, which gathered thousands of people who openly protested against the pope and his heresies. Neither Lefebvre nor the Abbé de Nantes participated in the protests.[44]

According to sedevacantists, the documents of the Second Vatican Council were riddled with heresies, as was everything said and done by the conciliar and post-conciliar popes. They also did not want to use the revised Tridentine Order of Mass that John XXIII had promulgated in 1962, since, if he was a pope at

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[41] Noël Barbara & Louis Coache Louis, *Vademecum du catholique fidèle* (Paris 1968), cf. Airiau 2014.

[42] All issues of *Einsicht* 1971–2025 are available at http://www.einsicht-aktuell.de [accessed 2025-12-03]

[43] About Elisabeth Gerstner, see "Der Pabste brachte das Chaos: Spiegel-Interview mit der Traditionalistenführerin Elisabeth Gerst-ner", *Der Spiegel* 38/1976.

[44] Airiau 2014.

all, he was dubious. However, the problems for sedevacantists did not end there. The head of the liturgical commission that later compiled the Novus Ordo, Annibale Bugnini (1912–1982), had also been the chief liturgical official during the last years of Pius XII and contributed to the reformed missal published in 1955. Therefore, Sedevacantists often consider that edition suspect as well and usually use an older missal in which Bugnini was not involved.[45]

Sedevacantists consistently argued that Marcel Lefebvre and the SSPX did not take a clear enough stand against the conciliar religion. Although few claimed that Lefebvre was a Freemason, they often portrayed him as an important tool for Masonic forces. The German-American sedevacantist pioneer Hugo Maria Kellner (1901–1986) wrote that the archbishop was part of a Masonic conspiracy. Lefebvre had signed all the conciliar documents and said the Mass according to the Novus Ordo. He was, therefore, a heretic and a schismatic. Furthermore, he was ordained a priest and consecrated a bishop by the archbishop of Lille, Cardinal Achille Liénart (1884–1973), a radical force during the Council, whom sedevacantists accused of being a Freemason of the highest degree. Therefore, Liénart's intention in consecrating Lefebvre had been to 'deceive the elect.' Because of this false intention, Kellner believed that Lefebvre was not consecrated as a bishop and might not even have been ordained a priest. The idea later spread among sedevacantists, though it was not universally accepted. Nevertheless, that Lefebvre 'deceived the elect' was fully agreed upon.[46]

In the late 1970s, sedevacantists discovered a document that tackled the issue of papal heresy in a new way. Since then,

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[45] See e.g. Anthony Cekada, *Work of Human Hands: A Theological Critique of the Mass of Paul VI* (West Chester 2010).

[46] Hugo Maria Kellner, "The Final Unmasking of 'Archbishop' Lefebvre's Satan-Inspired, 'Traditionalist' Imposture by the Detection of the Invalidity of His Own Orders", *Veritas* 72 (1977).

it has been the cornerstone of their argumentation. It was Paul IV's (1555–1559) bull *Cum ex apostolatus officio* (1559), which addressed, among other things, the question of whether a known heretic could be validly elected pope. Paul IV wrote that if a cardinal or pope had expressed heresy before being appointed to office, the election was 'null and void,' even if the vote was unanimous.[47] By referring to the bull, sedevacantists argued that it was sufficient to demonstrate that the conciliar and post-conciliar popes had made heretical and scandalous statements before the conclaves. If so, they had never been true popes. Therefore, the question of who, if anyone, had the right to accuse a pope of heresy was irrelevant.

In the second half of the 1980s, it became more common to claim that John XXIII had also been a heretic before the 1958 conclave and had not been a valid pope. He was considered a high-ranking Freemason and, between 1958 and his death in 1963, appointed a large group of cardinals who were Masons, communists, or crypto-Jews. This development paved the way for the election of Paul VI and, by extension, for the destruction of the Church. According to this argument, John XXIII was a 'diabolical John the Baptist' who paved the way for the antichrist: Paul VI.[48]

Although the strict sedevacantist position, that the Holy See had been vacant since 1958, is the most common, it is not the only variation on the theme. In the late 1970s, French Dominican Michel-Louis Guérard de Laurier (1898–1988) developed another, less radical alternative. Guérard de Laurier had been a

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[47] As far as I know, the bull was first brought to attention by the Argentine sedevacantist and Latin professor Carlos Disandro, who in 1978 published the original text with a Spanish translation and a detailed introduction: Carlos A. Disandro, *Bula Cum Ex Apostolatus Officio. Paulo IV – Año 1559: Texto, Traducción, Introducción* (Córdoba 1978). It was translated into other languages, including English, in the early 1980s.

[48] Airiau 2014.

theology professor in both France and Rome. He then taught at the SSPX seminary in Ecône, but was dismissed for his criticism of Lefebvre's ambiguous attitude towards the Council and, in particular, towards the pope.

Guérard de Laurier's solution to the papal question is sometimes called sedeprivationism or the Cassiacum thesis. He initially presented his idea in a lengthy article in his journal *Cahier de Cassiacum* (1979). Using a complicated scholastic exposition, he argued that Paul VI and his successors were 'materially but not formally' (*materialiter sed non formaliter*) popes. He claimed that the election of Paul VI was probably valid because cardinals appointed by Pius XII participated in the conclave. By accepting the election, Cardinal Montini had become pope 'in a material sense.' However, he lacked authority and jurisdiction, as he advocated heretical beliefs and had not renounced them. Consequently, he was not pope 'in a formal sense.' The same was true of his successors, John Paul I and John Paul II.

According to Guérard de Laurier, however, a material pope could become a formal pope and, thereby, a true leader of the Catholic Church if he actively and publicly renounced his heresies and began to proclaim orthodox doctrine. Through his formaliter-materialiter thesis, Guérard de Laurier argued that the saying that St. Peter would have successors until the end of the world still applied, while at the same time explaining the apparent pope's departure from traditional Church doctrine.[49]

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[49] Michel-Louis Guérard de Laurier, "La siège apostolique est-il vacant? (Lex orandi, lex credendi *)", Cahiers de Cassiacum: Études de sciences religieuses* 1 (1979), pp. 5–99. See also Donald J. Sanborn "Explanation of the Thesis of Bishop Guérard des Lauriers" (Brooksville 2002), available at https://mostholytrinityseminary.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Explanation-of-the-Thesis.pdf [accessed 2025-12-03]. The only detailed scholarly study of Guérard de Lauriers and his theology is Renato Arnellas Coelho, "O sedevacantismo segundo Michel-Louis Guérard de Lauriers" (Diss. São Paulo 2015).

The strict sedevacantists opposed the sedeprivationist position, believing it to be as incomprehensible and far-fetched as Lefebvre's, and devoted many articles and books to refuting it.[50]

[50] See e.g. Myra Davidoglu, *Analyse logique de la thèse dite de Cassiacum* ([1991], Marseille 2017).

IV. Waiting for a Pope: A Catholic Hierarchy without Rome

Although it is difficult to estimate the number of adherents, outspoken sedevacantist and sedeprivationist groups have always been a minority in the traditionalist landscape. However, their proportion has most likely increased in recent decades. The movement is strongest in the United States, Canada, Mexico, Brazil, Germany, France, and Italy. Although the number of adherents is limited, they have broader significance through publications, websites, and videos that target the 'conciliar religion,' as well as the SSPX, which is considered at least as flawed.

For sedevacantists to continue their activities during the prolonged Sede Vacante, they needed bishops who could ordain new priests. For them, it was not only the Novus Ordo that was a problem. It was also the new Pontifical (1968) with its reformed rites for ordinations and consecrations, since they were considered substantially changed and therefore invalid. The older Pontifical had to be used.[51]

In 1971, Francis Schuckardt of CMRI was ordained a priest and consecrated a bishop by Daniel Q. Brown, a bishop of the North American Old Roman Catholic Church. This independent Catholic jurisdiction had roots in European Old Catholicism and claimed valid apostolic succession. The church that Schuckardt

[51] I thank Paul Petit for giving me access to his very comprehensive and meticulous documentation of sedevacantist apostolic lineages: "Magna Carta of Apostolic Succession amidst Sedevacantist Orders" (2020).

came to lead after the ordination was called the Tridentine Latin Rite Church, although its followers believed that it was nothing less than the Church in the end times and that Schuckardt was the sole remaining bishop in the world. Around him, he had a growing group of priests, religious brothers, and sisters, and at its peak, the church had about 5,000 members and many more sympathizers.

Most other sedevacantists, however, did not see Schuckardt as a valid bishop and considered him a kind of 'pope of his own' who did not hesitate to introduce new rituals and teachings. Nevertheless, for his followers, he was the undisputed leader until 1984, when a majority of the priests expelled him from the church on charges of drug abuse, sexual molestation, and also for claiming, in an inner circle, that God had appointed him pope with the name Hadrian VII at the death of John Paul I in 1978. After expulsion, Schuckardt came to lead a tiny group, while the main group in CMRI, over time, became more like other sedevacantist groups and sought apostolic succession through other bishops. Today, CMRI is the largest sedevacantist group in the world, with at least 120 churches and mass centers, primarily in the United States and many other parts of the world.[52]

A solution to the episcopal problem for other sedevacantist groups came in the early 1980s through the Vietnamese Archbishop Pierre Martin Ngo-Dinh Thuc (1897–1984). He had lived in exile in Europe since 1963, when his brother, the president of South Vietnam, was killed. Thuc's was a rather unexpected traditionalist. In his two public interventions at Vatican II, he argued for more non-Christian observers to be present and for women to be ordained.[53]

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[52] For details about Schuckardt and his church, see Lundberg 2024.
[53] Edward Jarvis, *Sede Vacante: The Life and Legacy of Archbishop Thuc* (Berkeley 2018a).

In 1970, Paul VI replaced Thuc as Archbishop of Hue so that the church could continue its activities there, and he was made a titular archbishop. However, he had an unclear position and worked as a priest in various parts of Italy. Between 1976 and 1982, Thuc consecrated at least ten bishops, although even more, without any evidence or with falsified records, claimed to have been consecrated by him. In early 1976, Thuc consecrated four bishops for an apparitionist group in Palmar de Troya, Spain, which later became the Palmarian Catholic Church, led by its own pope. Thuc had been convinced to travel to Spain by a teacher at the SSPX seminary in Ecône who claimed it was the Virgin's will. The consecrations were unprecedented in modern Catholic history; a Catholic bishop consecrated several bishops against the explicit orders of the ordinary. In the end, Thuc was suspended and excommunicated.

Since 1976, hundreds of bishops have been ordained in the Thucite-Palmarian line of succession. After a formal apology, Thuc was reconciled with Rome and later lived in France, where he sometimes said Mass according to the Novus Ordo. In 1982, however, he declared that he was a sedevacantist, but before dying in 1984, he seemed to have been reconciled with Rome again.[54]

In 1981, Thuc ordained three distinctly traditionalist priests to the episcopate. First, he consecrated French sedeprivationist Michel-Louis Guérard de Laurier and then the two Mexican sedevacantist priests, Moisés Carmona y Rivera (1912–1991) and Adolfo Zamora (1910–1990), who had been close associates of Sáenz y Arriaga and represented Unión Trento.[55]

Most later sedevacantist and sedeprivationist bishops claim apostolic succession from Thuc through Carmona or Guérard de Lauriers. In addition to two Mexican bishops,

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[54] Jarvis 2018a. On the consecrations, see also part VIII of this book.
[55] Jarvis 2018a.

Benigno Bravo Valadés (1907–199?) and José de Jesus Roberto Martínez y Gutiérrez (1917–2008), Carmona consecrated three North American sedevacantist bishops between 1982 and 1991: George J. Musey (1928–1992) and Louis Vezelis (1930–2013), both of whom belonged to the Tridentine Latin-Rite Church, and Mark Anthony Pivarunas (b. 1958), leader of the CMRI. They have, in turn, ordained bishops.[56]

In 1986, Guérard de Laurier consecrated Robert F. McKenna (1927–2015) for the Tridentine Rite Church, who in turn made Elmer Vida (1912–1993) and Donald Sanborn (b. 1950) bishops. All of these were active in the United States.[57] McKenna also consecrated Geert Jan Stuyver (b. 1964), the leader of the Instituto Mater Boni Consilii, an Italian-based sedeprivationist group founded by priests who formerly belonged to the SSPX.[58]

Because of Thuc's erratic behavior and many consecrations in the 1970s and 1980s, much of the literature has been devoted to discussing their validity, whether they were performed correctly, or whether the archbishop was so confused that he did not know what he was doing. Although most sedevacantist groups trace their apostolic succession to Thuc, one of them, the Priestly Society of Pius V, which began as a group of former SSPX priests, considers his ordinations invalid. In 1993, their superior, Clarence Kelly (1941–2023), was consecrated by Alfredo Méndez González (1907–1995), former bishop of Arecibo, Puerto Rico.[59]

Another source of apostolic succession for smaller sedevacantist groups is the Brazilian bishop Carlos Duarte Costa (1888–1961). He was by no means a traditionalist, but left the

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[56] Petit 2020.
[57] Petit 2020.
[58] Petit 2020.
[59] Clarence Kelly, *The Sacred and the Profane* (Round Top 1997), see also Cuneo 1997, pp. 95–102.

Roman Catholic Church because of what he saw as its accepting stance towards fascism and founded the Brazilian Catholic Apostolic Church. In the diverse lines of succession in which Duarte Costa is involved, there are bishops of very different kinds, from the most liberal to sedevacantists. Furthermore, on the whole, the sedevacantist lineages are a complicated spider's web.[60]

[60] Edward Jarvis, *God, Land & Freedom: The True Story of ICAB, The Brazilian Catholic Apostolic Church. Its History, Theology, Branches and World-wide Offshoots* (Berkeley 2018b).

V. Ending the Sede Vacante: Alternative Conclaves

During the 1980s, a sedevacantist hierarchy developed, and even before that, sedevacantist and other traditionalist priests had said Mass and administered the other sacraments. At the same time, internal criticism developed. The question was whether bishops could be consecrated without papal mandate and whether priests could be ordained and administer the sacraments without valid episcopal authorization.

Those who concluded that the sedevacantist bishops and priests were not administering valid sacraments but were schismatics refrain from receiving them. They argued that canon law could not be set aside even though the prolonged Sede Vacante, which began in 1958, was a previously unknown phenomenon in Church History. They also used apocalyptic texts predicting that a period would come when the sacrifice of the Mass would cease, citing the Book of Daniel. Those who refrained from participating in traditionalist services and receiving the sacraments were popularly called 'stay-at-home Catholics' or 'home-aloners.' Many traditionalist laypeople could, in practice, be considered as such because they could rarely or never attend Mass or receive the sacraments. However, for the latter, it was not a matter of principled stance on the jurisdictional issue.[61]

A Sede Vacante could be very long-lasting—by the end of the 1980s, it had lasted for three decades—but sedevacantists

[61] Teresa Benns & David Bawden, *Will the Catholic Church Survive the Twentieth Century* (1990).

believed it could not last forever. St. Peter would have successors until the end of time, and the Church could not be characterized by 'perennial acephaly,' but the solution to the problem was unclear. Some believed that a new Pope would eventually have to be elected and were called conclavists.

Both among sedevacantists and 'home-alone Catholics,' these ideas had already appeared in the 1970s. At that time, Sáenz y Arriaga and others pointed out the necessity of a new conclave and raised the issue with Marcel Lefebvre. In their eyes, there was possibly a small number of cardinals and other bishops behind the Iron Curtain or in China who had not accepted Vatican II and could convoke an 'incomplete council' and a conclave to elect a true pope.[62] In 1983, the U.S. sedevacantist bishop George Musey wrote an open letter to Lefebvre about the necessity of a new conclave, and several individuals and groups, both in Europe and North and Latin America, pushed the issue.[63]

In early 1990, journalist Teresa Benns and former SSPX seminarian David Bawden (1959–2022) completed a comprehensive book: *Will the Catholic Church Survive the Twentieth Century?* They presented the usual arguments for sedevacantism, but argued against traditionalist priests administering the sacraments without the necessary jurisdiction, and called for a conclave later that year. Benns had been pushing for a conclave for almost a decade, and Bawden had devoted several texts to the jurisdictional problems. The book was sent to all known sedevacantist bishops, priests, and active writers. The conditions for participating in the conclave were to stop attending Mass and receiving other sacraments, to pray, and to study the catechism of the Council of Trent. Before the conclave, everyone had to sign

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[62] Benns & Bawden 1990. See also Homero Johas, "Refutación a la herejía de la 'Acefalía perenne' de John S. Daly" ([1992] 2014), https://www.fundacionsanvicenteferrer.blogspot.com/2014/10/refutacion-la-herejia-de-la-acefalia.html [accessed 2024-12-03].
[63] Musey 1983.

the First Vatican Council's Confession of Faith and renounce all heresies.

Benns and Bawden believed that the canonical law on conclaves was clear: cardinals would elect the pope. However, in a situation where no faithful cardinals remained, or at least could not be contacted because they lived in communist states, the responsibility for the survival and restoration of the church fell on sedevacantist bishops, priests, and lay people. In this context, they made a very far-reaching interpretation of the canonical concept of *epikeia*, which means, among other things, that laws must be able to be reinterpreted according to the intention of the legislator if the situation so requires and if it leads to some good of great value, for example, the salvation of souls.[64]

The practical result of Benn's and Bawden's efforts was very small-scale. Finally, six electors gathered in Kansas in 1990, and during the conclave, David Bawden was elected pope, taking the name Michael. The followers believed that papal jurisdiction was restored. However, since Bawden was not ordained and no priest or bishop submitted to his jurisdiction, in practice, they remained 'stay-at-home Catholics' because they did not have access to the sacraments. They could perform emergency baptisms and witness marriages, but nothing else.

It was not until 2011 that Bawden was ordained a priest and bishop by an independent Catholic bishop who had submitted to his jurisdiction. He had few followers but was a very active writer, and since the turn of the millennium, he ran several websites. Around 2020, the number of followers grew, and by the time of his death in 2022, Pope Michael had an archbishop, at least six priests, and several hundred parishioners under his jurisdiction. In the summer of 2023, a year after his death, a conclave was held in Vienna. Archbishop

[64] Benns & Bawden 1990.

Rogelio del Rosario Martinez Jr (b. 1970) from the Philippines was elected as the new pope, taking the name Michael II.[65]

During the 1990s, two more conclaves were held. One gathered a dozen electors, including bishops, priests, and lay people, in Assisi in 1994. The one elected as pope was a South African former SSPX priest, Victor von Pentz (1953–2021), who had settled in England. He took the name Linus II. However, the newly elected pope was withdrawn and made few, if any, public statements; he was invisible even to those who elected him. Although he never officially resigned, the question is how long he served as the church leader; it was probably not many years. Even during this time, he was basically invisible.[66]

The third alternative conclave was held in Montana in 1998 when the former Capuchin Lucien Pulvermacher (1918–2009) was elected Pope Pius XIII. About 60 electors participated; all except Pulvermacher were laypeople. Not all were present in person, but called in their votes. Pulvermacher's pontificate was marked by growing internal conflicts, and the number of followers decreased from about a hundred to a handful. However, he had an active ministry and published several papal statements and newsletters each year. Before his death, Pulvermacher took a new papal name, Peter II, which is inscribed on his tombstone. It seems he believed he was the last pope in history, but his former followers have so far tried, in vain, to organize a new conclave to choose a successor.[67]

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[65] Magnus Lundberg "Pope Michael", in David G. Bromley (ed), *World Religions and Spirituality Project* (2023a), https://wrldrels.org/2023/02/04/pope-michael [accessed 2025-12-03].

[66] Magnus Lundberg, "The Invisible Pope: Linus II and the 1994 Assisi Conclave"(2023b),https://magnuslundberg.net/2023/08/25/the-invisible-pope-linus-ii-and-the-1994-assisi-conclave [read 2025-12-03].

[67] Magnus Lundberg, "White Smoke over Montana: Pius XIII and the True Catholic Church" (2023c), https://magnuslundberg.net/2023/09/01/white-smoke-over-montana-pius-xiii-and-the-true-catholic-church [read 2025-12-03].

VI. Drugs and Doppelgangers: The Pope is Made Powerless

Parallel with the traditionalist condemnations of Paul VI and the rise of sedevacantism, in the early 1970s, completely different explanations emerged as to why the pope apparently approved heresy and made heretical statements. Individuals and groups claimed that Paul VI was not guilty of heresy. Instead, he was the innocent victim of a well-developed conspiracy that rendered him powerless. According to one theory, the pope was drugged by his closest men, which meant that he did not know what he was doing. Another theory held that the real Paul VI was being held prisoner and replaced by an actor who publicly made heretical statements.

According to both theories, the main culprits were high-ranking cardinals who were Freemasons, communists, and Zionists, and had no other intention than to cause the church to implode. The person usually identified as the cabal's leader was the Secretary of State, Jean-Marie Villot (1905–1979). However, according to the theory's defenders, most cardinals knew what was happening.[68]

The first testimonies that Paul VI was being held captive came from a Mexican nun: María Concepción Zúñiga López (1914–1979), better known as Madre Conchita. According to texts circulated in Spanish and other languages, in 1970, Christ revealed to her that Paul VI was imprisoned and that his close men forced him to sign heretical documents. In this context,

[68] Airiau 2014.

faithful Catholics were to pray and work for the pope's release so that he could publicly denounce Vatican II and the post-conciliar developments. According to Madre Conchita, Christ had told her: 'Paul VI is suffering! Do not leave him alone in prison! Go and look for him and release him.'[69]

Starting in the mid-1970s, these ideas were incorporated into the 'Holy City' of Nueva Jerusalén in the Mexican state of Michoacan, which was led by a traditionalist former parish priest, Nabor Cárdenas (1910–2008), Papá Nabor, who ruled the city with an iron fist for 35 years. In the 1970s, several thousand people lived in the theocratic community, mainly poor indigenous people from the countryside. Their religious life was based on apparitions received by an older woman. In the Holy City, followers constructed a building where Paul VI would live after escaping captivity. From there, he would lead the faithful in the end times.[70]

Beginning in 1975, messages about the pope being drugged emerged in several apparitions received by Veronica Leuken (1923–1995) at Bayside, New York. The alleged revelations to Leuken were controversial and condemned by the local church authorities. For some time, she still had a large following. The heavenly messages were disseminated through the group's publications and *Vers Demain*, a widely distributed magazine published by the Béret Blancs, an influential traditionalist group in Quebec. The Bayside messages were also circulated worldwide through general apparition-oriented publications.[71]

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[69] *Mensajes del Cielo a la Portavoz de Jésus en México 1969–1970*, vol. 1, (Villa de Guadalupe, no publication year), pp. 99–104.

[70]Miguel C. Leatham, "'Shaking Out the Mat': Schism and Organizational Transformation at a Mexican Ark of the Virgin", *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 42 (2003), pp. 175–187.

[71] Joseph P. Laycock, *The Seer of Bayside: Veronica Leuken and the Struggle to Define Catholicism* (Oxford 2015), pp. 122–124.

The doppelganger theory, that is, that an actor had replaced the real Paul VI, began to spread a few years later. The primary sources were testimonies from demons who had been exorcised. Exorcisms, not least long series, became more common in traditionalist circles after the 1973 premiere of *The Exorcist*. A growing genre of writings documented secrets about Satan's actions in the world and the church that priests forced exorcised demons to reveal. The doppelganger theory was based primarily on messages from demons driven out of a Swiss woman in the mid-1970s, but also on other cases in Italy and Belgium.[72] The ideas were initially spread through the book *Mahnung aus dem Jenseits* (1977) by Swiss Bonaventur Meyer (1920–2013), which was soon translated into other languages.[73]

Another version of the doppelganger theory combined the contents of prophecies, revelations, and messages from exorcised demons with photo analysis. The most well-known writings of this kind were Theodor Kolberg's two 1977 books *Umsturz in Vatican*? and *Der Betrug des Jahrhunderts*. The latter is full of photographs of Paul VI. The author claimed that through a careful analysis of facial features, he could prove that the actor had increasingly replaced Paul VI during the 1970s and that the

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[72] Alois Döring, "Dämonen geben Zeugnis: Teufelglaube und Exorzismus in traditionalistischen Bewegnungen", *Schweizerisches Archiv für Volkskunde/Archives suisses des traditions populaires* 81 (1985), pp. 1–24. On the rapidly increasing interest in exorcism after the film's release in 1973, see Joseph P. Laycock & Eric Harrelson , *The Exorcist Effect: Horror, Religion, and Demonic Belief* (Oxford 2023).

[73] Bonaventur Meyer, *Mahnung aus dem Jenseits über die Kirche in unserer Zeit: Textliche Dokumentation der Aussagen von Dämonen beim Exorzismus* (Trimbach 1977). On the Belgian exorcisms, see also Gerhard Braun (ed.) *Ancilla: Antwortet auf den Anruf unserer Herzen und ihr werdet gerettet werden! – Zeitnahe Botschaften unserers Herrn Jesus Christus und seiner Heiligsten Mutter Maria an Ancilla, eine Person bei Brüssel* (Böhl-Iggelheim 1975).

real pope had not been publicly visible since 1975.[74] As in other cases, the books were translated and summarized in magazines. They thus became ideas taken up by many in Catholic apocalyptic groups, and several expeditions to free the pope were organized during the second half of the 1970s.

Paul VI died in 1978, but among those who advocated the doppelganger thesis, some believed the real pope had not died, while the actor had. The real Paul VI was still held as a prisoner. In 1981, Bonaventur Meyer published the book *Die Kirche in Gefahr*. There, he claimed that Paul VI was alive but that the doppelganger had been murdered by Masonic cardinals when he planned to uncover the conspiracy. Once again, Meyer's primary sources were messages from expelled demons. According to Meyer, John Paul I, who died after just a month as the pope, was initially unaware of the conspiracy. However, the cardinals responsible had him killed when he was about to disclose the secret. On the other hand, Meyer believed that John Paul II was a central part of the conspiracy.[75]

Until he died in 2013, Bonaventure Meyer maintained that Paul VI was alive, and a small group has since defended and further developed his ideas. These groups, or rather individuals, who are almost exclusively active in France, usually call themselves survivantists.[76] The most active survivantist author, Jean-Baptiste André, builds on Kolberg's and Meyer's books and, like them, gives testimonies from exorcised demons a significant

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[74] Theodor Kolberg, *Der Betrug des Jahrhunderts* (Munich? 1977) and *Umsturz im Vatikan?* (Munich 1977).

[75] Bonaventur Meyer, *Die Kirche in Gefahr: Zeugnis der Wahrheit, einmalige Ausgabe zur Klärung der gefahrvollen Lage der Kirche heute* (Trimbach 1981).

[76] For a broader treatment of various forms of survivalism, especially concerning French pretenders to the faith, see Emile Appolis, "En marge du catholicisme contemporain: Millénarites, cordiphores et naundoffistes autor de 'Secret' de la Salette", *Archives de sociologie des religions* 14 (1962), pp. 103–121.

role. Still, the secrets connected with the Marian apparitions at La Salette (1846) and Fatima (1917), and the early apparitions received by Veronica Leuken in Bayside, also have a central place. According to André, one of the photographs taken at Bayside is a particularly significant sign from heaven. The year 1972 mysteriously appears in the photo. In the same year, Paul VI wrote in a letter stating that 'the smoke of Satan' had entered the Church during the post-conciliar era, claiming that the situation in the Church had become increasingly chaotic. Based on these interpretations, André claims that from 1972 to 1975 an actor sometimes replaced Paul VI, but from 1975 onwards the true pope was never let out at all, and the actor replaced him at all public occasions.

However, according to the survivantists, Paul VI will be rescued from his captivity in the end times and lead the faithful Catholics in the final battles between God and the devil. In 2026, the true pope would be 129 years old. According to the survivantists, the enemies of the Church are not only found in the great Roman Church but also among traditionalists and sedevacantists, that is, those who claim that Paul VI was not the true pope. To survivantists, he is the greatest martyr in modern church history.[77]

[77] Jean-Baptiste André, *La survie de Paul VI et le Secret de Fatima* (no place of publication, 2014a), *La grande apostasie de Vatican II et le Pape en exil de Fatima prédits par une mystique italienne* (no place of publication, 2014b) and *La survie de Paul VI: Une certitude de foi* (no place of publication, 2015). See also Eric Faure, *Le Pape Martyr de la Fin des Temps selon la tradition phétique médiévale* (Argentré-du-Plessis 1999),

VII. The Pope in Red: The Cardinal Siri Thesis

Another theory based on a conspiracy among the cardinals emerged in the mid-1980s. The gist of it was that someone other than Cardinal Montini, Paul VI, had been elected at the 1963 conclave but that he had been prevented from accepting office by external threats from communists, Freemasons, and 'Zionists.' According to supporters, the one elected was the traditionalist archbishop of Genoa, Cardinal Giuseppe Siri (1906–1989).

The thesis became somewhat better known in 1986, when the apocalyptic writer Louis-Hubert Rémy's brief article "Le pape serait-il le cardinal Siri?" was published in a French traditionalist magazine. Rémy claimed that an overwhelming majority of the cardinals at the 1963 conclave had elected Siri but that leading members of the curia left the conclave after the election to inform representatives of the B'nai B'rith, which was considered a Jewish form of Freemasonry. On the organization's orders, Montini announced his election as pope instead.[78]

Rémy cited a 'Prince Scortesco' as his primary source. The 'prince' was the French-Romanian painter Paul Scortescu (1893–1976), who in the early 1970s wrote several apocalyptic books in which he claimed that communists infiltrated the Church, that the Novus Ordo was a Satanic rite, and that the antichrist had arrived. According to Rémy, Scortescu claimed to know that Siri had been chosen through a relative who was a high-ranking

[78]Louis-Hubert Remy, "Le pape serait-il le cardinal Siri?", *Sous la Bannière* 6 (1986).

Vatican official.[79] Following these revelations, in 1985 Rémy organized a delegation that traveled to Rome to discuss the issue directly with Siri. In addition to himself, the group included the apocalyptic writer André Lesage (1901–1992), better known as the Marquis de la Franquerie. Siri said he could not say anything due to the vow of secrecy, but the delegation took this as evidence that the Siri theory was true or at least very likely.[80]

The Cardinal Siri thesis became known in the United States towards the end of the 1980s. One of the most ardent proponents was layman Gary Guiffré, who later claimed that Siri had been elected not only at the 1963 conclave but also at the conclave after the death of Pius XII in 1958. He placed the first of these conclaves in a Cold War context and claimed that the Soviets had threatened to bomb the Vatican if the outspoken anti-communist Siri had been elected. Guiffré also claimed that he could show that Soviet nuclear testing activity was unusually high just before and during the conclave.[81]

A central figure in this expanded Siri theory was the Vietnamese Tran Van Khoat, who served as a priest among Vietnamese boat people in Texas and later belonged to the SSPX. In 1988, the Australian traditionalist Hutton Gibson (1918–2020) paid for a trip to Italy to investigate the issue. During his stay there, Khoat contacted Siri, who again reminded him of his vow of secrecy. Khoat was convinced that Siri was the real pope but

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[79] Remus Mircea Birtz, "Un mystérieux roumain exilé: 'Prince Scortesco'. Qui était-ce? (Avec une incursion dans le paysage catholique occidental traditionnel)" (2018), see https://remusmirceabirtz.files.wordpress.com/2018/12/P-Remus-Mircea-Birtz-Un-rom%C3%A2n-exilat-misterios-Principele-Scortesco.-Cine-era.pdf [accessed 2025-12-03].

[80] Remy 1986.

[81] Gary Guiffré "'Grave Reasons of State: The Atomic Bomb and the Eclipse of the True Vicar of Christ," *Chiesa Viva* 485 (2015), see also William G. von Peters "The Siri Thesis" (no publication year), http://www.thepopeinred.com/thesis.htm [accessed 2025-12-03]

stated that the cardinal could not reveal it due to death threats and that he dared not accompany Khoat on the rescue trip to the United States. The Vietnamese later claimed that Siri had appointed several cardinals and had also chosen a successor to the pope.[82]

Although the Siri theory still has adherents, it experienced a significant backlash in 2018 when it was revealed that Khoat, the primary source of the expanded theory, was most likely never ordained a priest and was a married man.[83] Hutton Gibson, who had previously been an enthusiastic proponent, rejected the theory as early as the mid-1990s. However, his son, the actor, director, and sedevacantist Mel Gibson (b. 1956), has the rights to a film about Cardinal Siri's life, but no such film has yet been made.[84]

The Siri theory became more widely known to North American readers by being included in Malachi Martin's *The Keys of this Blood* (1990). According to him, Siri was elected pope in 1963, and Martin claimed to have personal knowledge, as he was still living in Rome and had good insight into church affairs at the highest level. Unlike the other writings on the theory, this was a best-selling book with a vast audience. Like many of Martin's other books, it deals with a communist-Masonic take-

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[82] Teresa Benns, "The Siri conjecture and Catholic Truth" (2019), https://www. betrayedcatholics.com/the-siri-conjecture-and-catholic-truth [accessed 2025-12-03].

[83] Teresa Benns, "Gregory XVIII/'Fr.' Tran Van Khoat Fraud Exposed!" (2018), https://www.betrayedcatholics.com/gregory-xviii-fr-tran-van-khoat-fraud-exposed/gregory-xviii-fr-tran-van-khoat-fraud-exposed [accessed 2025-12-03].

[84] On Mel and Hutton Gibson, see Bernard Doherty, "The Immolated Victim: Traditionalist Roman Catholicism and Mel Gibson's The Passion of the Christ", *St Mark's Review* 234 (2015), pp. 77–101.

over of the world and the church, in which his old order, the Jesuits, played a particularly devastating role.[85]

[85] Malachi Martin, *The Keys of this Blood: The Struggle for World Dominion between Pope John Paul II, Mikhail Gorbachev, and the Capitalist West* (New York 1990), pp. 608–609. On Martin, not least the best-selling and influential book *Hostage to the Devil* (1976) which turned out to have been based on completely fabricated exorcisms that Martin claimed to have attended, see Laycock & Harrelson 2023: 105–132. For alleged FBI documentation that Siri was actually chosen, see also Paul Williams, *Vatican Exposed: Money, Murder and the Mafia* (Amherst 2003).

VIII. A Tiara from Heaven: Divinely Elected Popes

In the 1990s, three alternative conclaves were held to elect a true pope: two in the United States and one in Italy. None of these pontiffs gained a significant following. However, there have been other recent popes whose churches have had many thousands of followers. What unites them is the idea that their leaders are 'mystically elected,' that is, that God intervened directly to crown them as popes. During the post-conciliar era, at least thirty individuals announced that they had been divinely chosen to lead the faithful in the end times. I have introduced the concept 'alternative popes' to name this mystically elected, but those alternatives also include the conclavist popes discussed in Chapter V.[86]

Most mystically appointed alternative popes have had a few hundred or even a few dozen followers. However, two churches have attracted several thousand members. These are the French and Canadian Apostles of Infinite Love and the Spanish Palmarian Catholic Church. As I have devoted much space to these churches elsewhere, I will give only a brief description here.

[86] Research on most of these popes has previously been very limited, but within the "Alternative Pope Project", which has been ongoing since 2015, I have so far published three monographs, some twenty research reports, and also written some forty blog posts and published scanned source material. See www.magnuslundberg.net [read 2025-12-03].

The Apostles of Infinite Love was led by the French priest Michel Collin (1905–1974). It was not primarily focused on changes after Vatican II but on the church authorities' unwillingness to officially approve many of the popular Marian apparitions that were reported, not least after World War II. According to Collin, neither Pius XII nor John XXIII could act freely because Freemasons kept them under strict surveillance. God chose Collin as Pope through a heavenly ceremony in 1950 to save the church. He was given the name Clément XV. In this context, Collin became a co-pope, able to act openly. In 1960, Collin announced that he was pope, which was the actual content of the Third Secret of Fatima. On behalf of Christ, he founded the Renewed Church, L'Eglise Renovée. Not unexpectedly, Collin was laicized and excommunicated by the Holy Office, and warnings against him were issued from bishops throughout Western Europe.

With the accession of Paul VI in 1963, Clément claimed that he was both an antipope and antichrist. The Apostles cannot be considered traditionalists in some respects. Their priests and bishops included married men and women who mainly said Mass in house chapels: cenacles. The Mass could be said in the vernacular, and there were many different Orders of Mass, including very short ones. Clément also established that not only the body and blood of Jesus were present in the sacrament, but also that of Mary. She was divine.

From 1966 onwards, extraterrestrials played a central role in Clément's theology. These 'planetarians' protected Christians, and their goodness made God wait for his judgment. He, therefore, baptized, ordained, and consecrated planetarians who would be active in the 'intergalactic church.' At its peak, at the end of the 1960s, the Renewed Church perhaps had as many as 10,000 members, not least in France, Switzerland, Germany, and Italy. When Clément XV died in 1974, no official successor was elected; his followers awaited his resurrection. After his death,

the church ebbed, and many competing factions appeared, each claiming to be the true heirs of Clément. Today, the groups that follow his teachings, including his ideas on the planetarians, are very few. However, minimal groups exist in, for example, France and Italy.[87]

Partly because of the emphasis on extraterrestrials, the large Canadian province broke away from Clément in 1967. Their main community was in rural St-Jovite, outside Montreal, Canada, and its leader, Gaston Tremblay (1928–2011), replaced Clément and took the name Gregory XVII. However, he never used the word 'pope' to refer to himself, but rather 'Servant of the Church.' The Canadian Apostles claimed that Clément XV had been the true pope but had apostatized and that God had instead chosen their leader to lead the church. The Canadian apostles now have their second 'Servant of the Church' and probably have a few thousand followers in Canada, the United States, the French Caribbean, Guatemala, Ecuador, and South Africa.[88]

The Palmarian Catholic Church is based in the small town of Palmar de Troya, outside Seville, where a gigantic basilica with adjacent monasteries serves as the church's center. The catalyst was a Marian apparition reported by three young girls in 1968. Soon, however, the girls were out of the picture, but many others claimed to have received apparitions at a field outside the village. Soon, a young man from Seville, Clemente

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[87] Antoine Delestre, *Clément XV: prêtre lorrain et pape à Clémery* (Metz 1985), Magnus Lundberg "Apostles of Infinite Love", in David G. Bromley, *World Religions and Spirituality Project* (2020a), https://wrldrels.org/2020/06/07/apostles-of-infinite-love/ [read 2025-12-03] as well as my forthcoming monograph *Clément XV, the Apostles of Infinite Love, and the Renewed Church.*

[88] Lundberg 2020a and Susan J. Palmer. "The Apostles of Infinite Love and the 'Hidden Children' of Saint-Jovite." in Susan J. Palmer, Martin Geoffroy & Paul L. Gareau (eds.), *The Mystical Geography of Quebec: Catholic Schisms and New Religious Movements* (Basingstoke 2020), pp. 193–216.

Domínguez (1946–2005), became the principal seer, receiving messages from the Virgin, Christ, and numerous saints. In the following years, Palmar de Troya became an important pilgrimage site despite the local Catholic hierarchy ruling that the apparitions were false.

In late 1975, the group around Domínguez convinced Archbishop Thuc to travel to them to ordain priests, and in early 1976, he consecrated four men, including Domínguez, as bishops. Over the next two years, the initial consecrations gave rise to about 90 new bishops. The Palmarians claimed that Paul VI was a prisoner in the Vatican, but that upon his death in 1978, God mystically elected Clemente Domínguez as his successor. He took the name Gregory XVII, the Holy See moved from Rome to Palmar de Troya, and the Palmarian Church became the only true Catholic Church in the end times.

Through private revelations to Domínguez/Pope Gregory, but also from older revelation traditions, the Palmarian doctrine developed rapidly, and around the turn of the millennium, the church published a thoroughly revised Palmarian Bible, which presented events in a strict chronological order with dates and details that had been revealed. Gregory XVII led the church until he died in 2005, and now the Palmarians are led by their fourth pope, Peter III. The Palmarians may have had as many as 5,000 members at their peak. Today, they are a considerably smaller group, but they still have about thirty bishops and at least fifty nuns.[89]

[89] See Magnus Lundberg *A Pope of Their Own; El Palmar de Troya and the Palmarian Church* (Uppsala 2020b).

Concluding Reflections: Conspiracist Variations

It is clear that all the variations of traditionalist approaches to the conciliar church and its popes that I have studied, to a greater or lesser extent, include conspiracist ideas. According to Michael Barkun's classic study of conspiracy cultures, the basic features of such thinking are that powerful, more or less secret, evil forces control people's destinies and that 'nothing happens by accident, nothing is as it seems, and everything is connected.' This thought pattern also leads to a dichotomy between darkness and light, evil and good.[90]

The type of conspiracist thinking that I have studied is an example of what Barkun calls 'systemic conspiracies'; they are not related to an particular event, such as who assassinated John F. Kennedy or whether the 1969 moon landing was a hoax. Instead, it is the perception that a cabal, an at least partially secret elite, attempts to control the entire world.[91]

Applied to traditionalist groups, it is evident that there are widespread beliefs that organized groups for a long time have worked purposefully to undermine the Church, transform it, and finally make it implode. Catholic traditionalists believe that these conspiring forces are primarily Freemasons, Jews

[90] Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (Berkeley 2003), pp. 2–4. For conspiracy theories, see also the articles in Butter & Knight 2020.
[91] Barkun 2003, pp. 6–7.

('Zionists'), and communists. Nevertheless, these groups are intertwined and have a common Satanic agenda.

Despite the conspirators' secrecy, traditionalists have sometimes published lists of alleged Freemasons among bishops and cardinals. In such cases, the somewhat loosely defined groups of conspirators are incarnated in concrete individuals at the highest echelons of the church. From them, its effects trickle down to the priests and laity.

Anti-Freemasonry, anti-Semitism, and anti-communism were long, well-integrated parts of Catholic discourse. Catholics are still prohibited from becoming Freemasons. Still, from an official perspective, today Freemasonry is rarely seen as a global threat to the Church's very existence. The official Church, especially since Vatican II, clearly distances itself from anti-Semitism. However, there is a long anti-Semitic history within the Church, and the fact that the official stance has changed does not mean that anti-Semitic thoughts are present in many individual Catholics and groups throughout the world. Moreover, communism, as atheistic and anti-religious, is an ideology that the Church opposes.[92]

What the traditionalists do is use anti-Masonry, anti-Semitism, and anti-communism against contemporary Catholicism in the form of Rome, especially against its leadership. Freemasons, 'Zionists', and communists are the ones pulling the strings of what, on the surface, appears to be the Catholic Church. However, it is a conciliar religion without any Catholic features.

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[92] Doherty 2022 sees anti-Freemasonry, anti-Semitism, and anti-communism as three of five traditional and official Catholic conspiracies, while the others are anti-Satanism and anti-modernism. It is noteworthy, incidentally, that an otherwise excellent anthology of contemporary religion and conspiracy theories hardly addresses contemporary traditionalist Catholic conspiracy culture: Asbjørn Dyrendal, David G. Robertson & Egil Asprem (eds.) *Handbook of Conspiracy Theory and Contemporary Religion* (Leiden 2018).

Anti-Semitism seems most prevalent among sedevacantists. A basic idea is that a group of influential Jews, often referred to as 'Zionists', dominate the world, both economically and politically, that Jews created Bolshevism, and started the two World Wars. Some claim that the Holocaust is a hoax. *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, filtered through the writings of Denis Fahey and others, are presented as truth by the Mexican group compiled the *Complotto contra la Chiesa* (1962), and in the writings of Joaquín Sáenz y Arriaga, anti-Semitism is the overarching theme, though linked to anti-Freemasonry and anti-communism.

Anti-Semitism of this very pronounced kind was not characteristic of Marcel Lefebvre. For example, he made very few statements about Jews (or Muslims). However, he praised, for example, the military junta in Argentina, which had clear anti-Semitic features, the Front National, and the Vichy regime. Nevertheless, Brian Sudlow has shown that researchers have exaggerated the extent of Lefebvre's political involvement. However, according to Mark Weizman's careful studies, Lefebvre and many others in the SSPX leadership still harbored the fundamental idea that the combined elite group of Freemasons, Jews, and communists was the greatest threat to the Catholic faith.[93]

Among traditionalists, Freemasonry is seen as a globally cohesive movement whose goal is to transform the Catholic Church into a global, indifferent, anthropocentric religion. Accusing alternative traditionalist groups of Masonic influence is common in clashes between the groups. In the theories that the pope was drugged or held prisoner or that Cardinal Siri was

[93] Sudlow 2017 and Mark Weitzman, "'Every Sane Thinker Must Be an Anti-Semite': Antisemitism and Holocaust Denial in the Theology of Radical Catholic Traditionalists", in Anthony McElligott & Jeffrey Herf (eds.), *Antisemitism Before and Since the Holocaust* , (Cham 2017), pp. 83–113,

elected pope, the idea that Freemasonry had reached the very top of the church hierarchy played a central role. However, even in these cases, it was connected to threats from Jewish elite groups and communist states.

Traditionalist Catholicism emerged during the Cold War. Among the criticisms made by traditionalists were what they saw as the Vatican's more diplomatic Ostpolitik, which developed from John XXIII onwards, and the Council's failure to issue a separate, solemn statement disavowing communism. This omission was a sign of the strong influence of ideology in the church leadership. Those who were considered communists within the church leadership were also considered freemasons and 'Zionists', these were three aspects of the same basic conspiracy.[94]

The conspiracy-based approach means that groups and individuals who would otherwise be far apart share many basic ideas. In the United States, for example, you can see how traditionalist Catholics, conservative evangelicals, and the Trumpist MAGA supporters approach each other in a resistance to 'globalism' and the so-called deep state. For some leading evangelicals, Catholicism is in itself a satanic religion, and the pope is antichrist.[95] Nevertheless, also for many tradi-tionalist Catholics, the man in Rome who calls himself the pope is, in fact, antichrist. So, in a seemingly contradictory way, the anti-Masonic, anti-Semitic, and anti-communist conspiracy theories are mixed with a kind of anti-Catholic ideas. At the same time, for most of these groups, as I argued, the pope has nothing to do with Catholicism; the apparent leader of the Catholic Church leads a non-Catholic religion. The pope is not Catholic.

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[94]Doherty 2022, p. 256.
[95]Doherty 2022, pp. 259 – 261.

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